TRANSPORTATION BRIEFING DOCUMENT

An Overview of Regional Transportation Planning in Vancouver/Clark County

INTRODUCTION

- A typical conversation about transportation begins with a list of problems followed by a list of solutions. But if the conversation pauses for a moment to consider transportation in a broader context, the tone of the discussion changes.

- When you think about it, our transportation system is actually a way of life. It is a way of life that reflects our social desires, our cultural habits, how our economy works, and how our region has grown and urbanized.

- When we discuss our transportation problems and solutions we are talking about decisions and choices that affect our way of life. These transportation choices infact have an array of impacts that touch almost every aspect of our daily lives.

URBAN GROWTH AND TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM DEMAND

- Clark County had a population of 192,000 in 1980; today we have 363,000 people living in Clark County and over 200,000 cars. That's a population increase of 82% and more cars today than we had people in 1980.
- In the last 20 years, our state has had population increase by 48%, jobs increase 58% and vehicle miles traveled increase by 88%. At the same time total personal income grew by 110%, but the state capital outlay for expanding road capacity per dollar of personal income has dropped by 50%.

- The statewide and southwest Washington's list of transportation project needs demonstrates the fact that we have grown faster in population and employment than the amount of funding that has been invested into expanding the capacity of the transportation system. Without additional transportation funding, WSDOT is not expected to be able to build any new capacity expansion projects in our region.

- The result of high growth and low transportation infrastructure investment is higher travel demand and increasing traffic congestion.

Based on Clark County's 20-year growth estimate, the vehicle miles traveled in the evening peak hour is estimated to increase from 613,600 today to 955,000 for an increase of 341,400 vehicle miles traveled in a single peak evening commuter hour.

TRANSPORTATION FUNDING AND COST TRENDS

- Federal transportation revenues include federal highway excise taxes (motor fuel tax, excise tax on tires, trucks and trailers, and heavy vehicle use fees), Federal Transit Administration grants from federal general funds, and federal aviation grants. Federal revenue sources generate about $22 million/year in Clark County which primarily comes from the $.18/gallon federal gas tax.

- State transportation revenues consist of state fuel taxes, vehicle licensing permits and fees, motor vehicle excise taxes, bond proceeds, ferry fares, and state aviation tax revenues. State revenue sources generate about $53 million/year in Clark County which primarily comes from a $.23/gallon state fuel tax. The $.23/gallon fuel tax set in 1991 now generates about $.16/gallon in purchasing power due to inflationary construction costs.

- Local transportation revenues in addition to a portion of the state transportation revenues primarily come from property taxes. For example, Clark County's total property tax assessment is about $14.40/$1000 and of that about $2.25 is dedicated to their road fund.

  C-TRAN collects three tenths of one-cent sales tax, which generates about $ 12 million per year to operate the transit system.

- The average vehicle expenditure in Washington State is $8,188/vehicle. A partial breakout of the total expenditure is a follows: 1) $5,820 for payments/finance; 2) $885 is for insurance; 3) $595 is for maintenance/repairs; 4) $635 is for gasoline without taxes; 5) $98 is for federal gas tax; 6) $125 is for state gas tax; and 7) $30 is for annual license tabs.

- Highway maintenance costs per registered vehicle totals about $27.47/registered vehicle per year. A partial breakout of the component costs are as follows: 1) $5.52 for snow and ice control; 2) $3.45 for pavement maintenance; 3) $2.25 for bridge maintenance and operations; 4) $2.18 for storm water management; 5) $1.50 for striping, marking and guidepost maintenance; 6) $.88 for sweeping and cleaning; 7) $1.11 for highway lighting; and 8) $.77 for liter control.

TRANSPORTATION PROJECT FUNDING

- The funding of large highway construction projects such as adding freeway lanes, improving intersections and constructing new freeway interchanges almost always involves city, county, state and federal sources of revenue.

- The type of project and the jurisdiction who owns the roadway (interstate, state highway, local/regional arterial) are often a good indicator for how the transportation project is funded. Roadway operations, maintenance and preservation are usually funded locally through an annual budget process. Projects that add system capacity such as adding lanes on street arterials, state highways, or on the interstate system will most likely involve multiple sources and may include various competitive grant programs.

- Federal transportation revenues are allocated to projects through a range of funding programs that include: interstate maintenance, bridge replacement, safety, capacity expansion, and projects to improve air quality.

- Each city, the County, WSDOT and C-TRAN all prepare a six year program of transportation projects. This process produces a project-by-project listing of funding to be allocated to the respective projects for design, right of way, construction and operation.

- The regional projects that utilize federal transportation funds and state highway projects are further prioritized and programmed into a state and federally required document called the Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Program. The adoption of this document by the RTC Board authorizes the expenditure of the federal funds per the specific project request.

- Examples of specific project funding cycles include the following: 1) over the last 3 years, about $178 million has been spent on highway construction in our region, which is the product of the previous 8-10 years of planning, design and right of way acquisition; 2) the alignment of I-205 first appeared on plans in 1957, the design was completed in the mid-70's and opened to traffic in 1982; 3) the I-5 widening project now being completed had design/environmental work completed in the mid-80's, and; 4) the 192nd corridor project and interchange at SR-14 to be completed in 2003 was a "fast track" project with design started in 1995-96, and funded in phases starting in 1997-98 and 2000.

- Referendum 51 is an example of the trend to identify projects in a legislative process and ask voters to approve the revenue options. In the case of R-51, the legislature established the list of projects in one bill and the revenue package to fund the projects in a separate bill. The revenue bill which sought state a 9 cent per gallon fuel tax increase, higher truck weight fees and a one-time 1% sales tax surcharge on purchased vehicles was referred to the voters in the November 2002 election. As it turned out, R-51 failed to win a majority.

- Another important legislative trend (Regional Transportation Investment Districts, Senate Bill 6140) to be noted is the trend toward regionalism. This bill provided for the creation of Regional Transportation Investment Districts. The introductory section of the bill states: "The state cannot by itself fund in a timely way many of the major capacity improvements required on highways of statewide significance…Timely construction and development of significant transportation improvement projects can best be achieved through enhanced funding options for governments at the county and regional level…." The regionalism legislation at the current time only provides this option for the counties in the Puget Sound area.

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING PROCESS AND AUTHORITIES

- The transportation planning and project selection process in Clark County involves general-purpose local governments (cities and County), C-TRAN, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC). While each entity identifies their individual planning and project decisions, all of the federally funded regional decisions at some point come under RTC's planning and decision-making umbrella.

- The Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC) provides the public forum for elected officials and other transportation agencies to make transportation planning, transportation policy, project programming and project priority decisions across jurisdictions and across transportation modes.

- The cities and the County are required under the state's Growth Management Act (GMA) to develop a transportation capital facilities element that is consistent with the regional transportation plan. However, each jurisdiction via their respective City Councils or County Commission has the final decision on the selection of transportation projects that are funded with local tax revenues and transportation development impact fees.

- C-TRAN, the local transit operator, collects three-tenths of one-cent of the sales tax revenues collected in Clark County and they receive federal formula and discretionary transportation funds. The C-TRAN Board makes all final operational and capital investment decisions. However, the project programming of federal transportation revenues is again coordinated with RTC and must have final approval by the RTC Board.

- WSDOT carries out a departmental-based transportation planning and project programming process based on a combination of policy direction from the Washington State Transportation Commission and budgetary authority from the Washington State Legislature. Their key planning guidance comes from the State Transportation Plan and State Highway System Plan, both of which are developed to be consistent with RTC's regional transportation plan. Because of their size and jurisdictional control over the state highway system, WSDOT project decisions are iterative between RTC's regional planning process, the WSDOT Commission and State Legislature.